



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, life-giving God. Amen.

So I have a little confession to make. Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. More than Christmas or Easter. And I realize that will get me in some hot water in some places. And I have to say it was never about the food either, because no matter what we do to it, you know, I'm sorry, but that turkey is always dry. I'm sorry. It is. Don't fool ourselves. And that stuffing, you know, way too many carbs. And the vegetables, you know, if there are any, are usually smothered in a kind of like white gravy of some sort. I don't know exactly what that is. I just know my doctor told me years ago, don't eat anything white, Chris, just stay away.

So no, it was never about the food at Thanksgiving, it was always about the people. Because unlike Christmas and Easter, which always seemed like they were kind of just for the family, Thanksgiving was always a kind of melting pot, and that was even more true when I moved to Southern California because there, unlike the Midwest, no one is actually from there. They are all transplants from somewhere else, you know, like Florida basically. So when Thanksgiving comes around, it is always a Friendsgiving. You just push a whole bunch of tables together and you open your doors for anyone who didn't have a place to go.

And I'll never forget looking around our table one year and just remarking at the diversity of those gathered. We had the director of the San Diego Symphony who was sitting next to a young man whose documented/undocumented status was a little vague. And he was sitting next to a neighbor of mine who was this kind of new-age folk musician, who was sitting next to some people whose name I didn't quite get as they came in the door. And next to them was a friend of mine who was a former executive from Mobil Oil, and next to him was a director of a homeless shelter. And next to him was a young man who had been recently kicked out of his home by his parents for being gay.

You see what I'm painting here? You see the picture. It was a whole lot of people without a whole lot in common. And so we always kicked it off by going around the table one by one, inviting everybody to share a word about what was going on in their life, that they were thankful for. And it's amazing what that simple little question can do, isn't it? Rather than polite conversation about the latest shows on Netflix, we suddenly found ourselves sharing stories, sharing our joys, our challenges, our hopes, stories about ourselves we probably didn't expect to tell a bunch of people we only just met.

And somehow through the laughter, through some of the tears, through the breaking of the bread and the sharing of our lives, like a bunch of strangers who found themselves on the road to Emmaus, Jesus became known to us around that table, and we were spiritually fed in a way we never expected. And I think that is what Jesus is trying to remind us about today. The gospel tells us how some of the crowd who had been there for the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, you remember that? Well, some of them have now come looking for Jesus and they found Him and it's not clear exactly why. It could be that they were intrigued and wanted to know more, or it could be that they were simply hungry and looking for another meal. But regardless, Jesus invites the crowd to instead recognize their deeper hunger, their spiritual hunger that only the bread of life can satisfy.

As you hear that, as you hear Jesus describe the bread of life, what are you hungry for? What are you thirsty for on this Thanksgiving week? Are you hungry to be seen in a world that can make us feel so invisible? Are you hungry for acceptance for who you really are, as you really are? Are you hungry to be healed of old wounds, old grievances, old resentments that still have a hold on us? Are you starving for peace? Peace in your family. Peace in your workplace. Peace in our country. St. Augustine said our hearts are restless until they rest in God. The bread of life is that rest, resting in relationship with God and one another. It's the great commandment, love of God, love of others. That's the bread that sustains, that's the bread that endures. Substitute anything else, and it will eventually leave you feeling empty once more.

And I think it's a lesson that we intrinsically know, isn't it? I know that's for sure true at the bookends of our life when life is most simple, when it's the least distracted. We've been teaching our girls at home to pray when they settle down to bed each night, and I decided to start by asking them, you know, what are you thankful for? And they were only four going on five or so, and I wasn't really sure how they'd relate to the question. Well, Aleena jumped right in, hamburgers! And then Gianna followed suit, hot dogs! And then candy, and then ice cream and on it went like that. And then they moved on to their favorite toys, naming every single one of them.

But after a couple of days of that, and without any prompting from me, they stopped naming their toys, they stopped naming their favorite food and they started to name the people in their life. Grandma and Grandpa, their teachers, Ms. Kelly right here at the church. Every one of their friends, every one of them by name, their aunts and uncles, even Dad and Daddy made the list. For them at this stage in their life, they are crystal clear. It is all about relationships, and I've been at enough bedsides of those at the end of life to see that it's just as true there as well. Our once big and complicated lives fade into the background and

we once again become utterly focused on our friends, on our family who are there to hold us, and our God whose loving arms await.

Perhaps this gospel, perhaps it's for those of us living in the middle chapters of life where we can be most prone to distractions. Jesus seems to know that part of the journey for all of us is a bit inevitable. We're all going to wander. We're going to try to do life our way. We're going to try to do it under our power, under our terms, with our own fuel, until life either catches up with us or we make such a mess of things that we have to relearn that truth that we once knew as children. So how do we stay focused on the bread of life in the midst of our busy and consumer driven culture that can seem sometimes like an all-you-can-eat buffet, right, of sweet tasting, attractive looking, but as we know, eventually unsatisfying alternatives? Give us this bread always the crowd cries out. Well, here's one way.

When I was baptized, I was given a set of five spiritual practices to be a kind of rule of life, to help keep my focus on Jesus. And in many ways they are a summary of the baptismal promises that we're about to take. And I commend them to everyone who could use a reliable compass in their life. Number one, pray daily. Take five or 10 minutes every day to have a conversation with God. That's all it needs to be, a conversation. Share with God what you're thankful for, what you're sorry about, what's on your heart. Do you take time to do that with God every day? And don't hold back. Don't edit yourself. Don't think that what's on my mind is too petty or too unimportant. If it's bothering you, it's bothering God. God wants to hear it. God wants nothing more than to hear it.

Number two, worship weekly. Preaching to the choir on this one, right? You're all here. You get it. The only thing I will add is this. Don't stay away when life gets difficult. Too often when I haven't seen someone at church for a while, I'll ask, what's been going on? Where have you been? And they'll say something like, "You know, Chris, I was going through a real rough patch. I lost my job. I lost a dear friend. I was in a kind of a dark place. I was stressed out. I was busier than you can imagine. I couldn't think straight. And it always breaks my heart to hear that because church isn't the place to come only when you feel like you have life going your way. Church is the place to come when it feels like it's falling apart because it's here that it will start to come together in a whole new way.

Number three, learn constantly. Do we not have a few offerings around here to learn constantly? Our weekly Bible studies, our Sunday forums, our Wednesday night classes, our Women's Spirituality group, countless bookstore studies. The point is gather. Gather with others, wrestle with your faith, share your life. Allow your assumptions to be challenged and let the scriptures read you. And watch as your faith grows and your relationships with others change.

Number four. Are you keeping track, Bill? You need a pen? Number four, serve joyfully, whether it's in your neighborhood, a community group, a local school, or through one of the many ministries of this church, find the intersection of your gifts, your passions, and where the world's deep needs meet. Each of us have been gifted by God in ways that no one else ever has or ever will be. We all have what we need to love and serve this world in a way that no one else can. Experiment, try things out. See if you can find the place where your heart sings as you serve, where you are fed as you feed others.

And finally, number five, give generously. And I know what you're thinking. I did not add that one. I know it's Pledge Sunday, but it's always been on the list, okay? I promise you. Giving has always been on the list because it's always been part of the story. God gave us life. God gave us this world and everything in it. God gave us His Son, and that Son gave His life for all of us. God gives because God loves and giving is love in action. Giving is the heart of what it means to be Christian. And notice the word "generously." I don't think it works the same way when we give timidly. I don't think it works quite as well when we give meekly or comfortably or reluctantly. Give in a way that makes you move. Give in a way that makes you have to budget around it. Give in a way that causes you to rearrange your priorities. Give in a way that causes you to have to say no to something so you can say a bigger yes to God.

These five simple spiritual practices will keep you feasting on the bread of life always. And while each of them is a value in and of itself, they are far more than the sum of their parts when they come together. They help us to bring our whole selves to God, our whole lives to God's table where we will be fed in ways we never expected and transformed in ways we never dreamed. Love of God, love of others. That's the bread of life. It's a lesson we learn at the beginning and one that we know all too well at the end. What might our life look like? What might the world around us become if we were able to practice it each day along the way?

Amen.